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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DANGEROUSNESS TO PUBLIC SAFETY OF PARAPHRASES FROM THE KORAN, NEW TESTAMENT, BOOK OF MORMON, TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD, AND EGYPTIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD PRESENTED AS PATIENTS' BELIEFS[1]

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Summary.—In one experiment 40 first-year psychology students were asked to judge dangerousness to society of 10 fictitious patients who professed beliefs about an "alien." The statements were actually paraphrases primarily concerning death and killing from the New Testament, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. In a second experiment 39 first-year psychology students were asked to rate the dangerousness of the verbatim statements with their sources identified. In the first experiment, statements from the Koran, which involved accessing a positive afterlife by killing nonbelievers in the name of a deity, were ranked as more dangerous. The differences between the sources accommodated 33% of the variance in the rankings for dangerousness. The group of students who were given the original statements and their actual sources ranked the statements from the New Testament and the Koran as significantly less dangerous than those who were told the statements were from patients. These results suggest that statements about killing and death may be rated as less dangerous if the person believes the source was a "sacred text."

The primary theme of religious beliefs involves death and the survival of death through affiliation with an omnipotent, omniscient and eternal Being. All religions emphasize one of three anxiolytic solutions to the cognitive sequence "I will die" that can be considered a semantic form of conditioned suppression (Persinger, 1985). Challenge of the absolute truth of these beliefs threatens the person's anticipation that some component of the self survives.

One response by groups of *Homo sapiens* who endorse the same religious belief has been to marginalize or even to kill those who do not believe similarly. The simple existence of these "others" potentially indicts the validity of the group's one "true" deity and all of the assumptions associated with it (Persinger, 1987). Although some scholars may attribute this behavior to secondary factors such as poverty, restrictive religious environments, or the intrinsic discrimination by human perception, the propensity to kill

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others who "do not believe" may be encouraged by reading statements that are believed to be the words of Yahweh, Allah or some God-equivalent.

Beliefs encourage the reflexive acceptance of the meaning of statements attributed to deities or to cultural traditions if they are coupled with the person's definition of self or the self's survival of death. A phrase such as "belief requires faith rather than logic or proof" is a common example. However, this mentality may be dangerous. About 7% of a sample of university students reported they would kill in God's name if He told them to do so (Persinger, 1997). This percentage increased to 45% if the person was male, displayed elevated complex partial epileptic-like signs, reported a religious experience as a child, and attended church regularly (Buckman, 2002).

Some religious texts, such as the Koran, contain statements that promise greater access to a positive afterlife (Paradise) if the believer kills others or is killed in the process of killing others, particularly nonbelievers, in the deity's (Allah's) name. The purpose of the present study was to discern if beliefs about killing or death, extracted from five scriptural traditions, would be judged by a sample of university students as differentially dangerous to society. To remove the religious association with these statements, the names of the deities were changed in one experiment to "The Alien," and words that might identify the source were paraphrased.

Method

Subjects

In Exp. I (2001-2002) a total of 13 men and 27 women and in Exp. II (2002-2003) 15 men and 24 women who were enrolled in first-year psychology courses were recruited as subjects. Their ages ranged between 19 and 35 years of age. About 60% of the subjects indicated they were Roman Catholic, 25% reported they were some variation of Protestant, and 15% indicated they were not affiliated, agnostic or atheists.

Procedure

In a single sitting in March (2002 and 2003) during the last hour of a regular 3-hr. class period students were asked to read the following information under the title "Clinical Rating Exercise." The subjects had been exposed to about six hours of lecture material regarding abnormal psychology and had read multiple examples of letters from individuals who were diagnosed with different pathologies. All of the students who attended the lectures completed the task that required about 20 min.

In Exp. I (March 2002) the instructions were "Read the following comments of delusional patients about their reports of receiving special information during alien abductions." [The specific names of "the entity" have been changed simply to "alien."] Your task is to determine which of these pa-

tients are most dangerous to society because of their beliefs about their own immortality or definitions of self with respect to dissolution of the self, i.e., death. Your job is to protect the public from "dangerous offenders." The subjects were then given a Likert-type scale with anchors of 1 (not dangerous) and 4 (ambiguous) and 7 (very dangerous). The instructions below the scale stated "Read each patient's comments and then rank the risk of killing others due to the 'logic' of the delusion by assigning a number from 1 through 7."

The "patients" were identified only by letters A to J. The comments for the 10 patients were paraphrased from five sources of scriptures (2 per source) that included the New Testament (Jehovah Witness translation: New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, 1984), the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Budge, 1967), the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1960), the Koran (Dawwood, 1956) and the Book of Mormon (1981). The two paraphrases were comments concerning killing, dying/destruction, or creation/survival that had been selected randomly from a list of statements and page numbers (from the author's notes when the documents were read several years ago) containing these words. The specific paraphrases that the subjects read, and the actual sources (indicated in parentheses) are listed below.

A. I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the Alien. The books were opened; it was the book of life. The dead were judged according to what was reported in the books. These things indicted the behavior of the dead when they were living. Those names not found in the book will be thrown into a lake of fire (Bible, Revelations 20:12-14).

B. When you die, you experience illusions. Along the bright light path there are hallucinations of fear, awe, and terror. The forces of anger protect us in the front and in the back. If we are lucky, we are saved from passing through the narrow and fearful passage and enter into a state with the Alien (Tibetan Book of the Dead; Budge, 1967).

C. If you should die or be killed in the cause of the Alien, the Alien's forgiveness and mercy would be surely better than all the riches. If you die or be killed, you will be taken by the Alien into his midst (the Koran, the Imrans; Dawwood, 1956, p. 410).

D. The Alien created the universe. The Alien made human beings. The Alien is merciful to those who embrace his existence. If you think about him, he knows this. If you admit the Alien is there he knows you and he will protect you (the Egyptian Book of the Dead; Budge, 1967, p. xciii).

E. The Alien became flesh like a person. He died for all people so that all people might be helped by the Alien. All humans must die. To fulfill the plan of the Creator of the Universe there must be the phenomenon of surviving death. Death occurred because people engaged in nonoptimal behav-

ior and they were disconnected from the Alien (Book of Mormon, Nephi 9:5-6).

F. The Alien has promised the men and women who believe in Him gardens with running water and in which they will live forever. The Alien promised mansions and a world of beauty. Make war on the people who do not believe in the Alien and deal with them severely. Their home will become torment and fire (the Koran, Repentance; Dawwood, 1956, p. 320).

G. Those who rebel against the Alien listen to the evil forces. They become an enemy of the Alien and all that is right. Therefore, the Alien has no place for them in His domain. If you die before you believe in the Alien, you will become conscious of your own guilt. It will fill your Being with pain, anguish and an unquenchable fire whose flame will last forever (Book of Mormon, Mosiah 2:37-38).

H. The Alien told me this. May the elements of the universe not be destructive to me. I will see the realm of the Blue Alien. May the particles of the universe not be destructive to me. I will see the realm of the White Alien. May the fundamental forces of the universe not be against me. I will see the realm of the Yellow Alien (Tibetan Book of the Dead, Prayer for Guidance; Budge, 1967, p. 201).

I. The time is coming when every one who kills others will imagine he has rendered a cosmic service to the Alien. They will do these things because they have not known the Alien (New Testament, John 16:2).

J. Fear and terror are around the Alien. It has lived a million years. The Alien kills our enemies. By knowing the Alien you can seize the power of darkness. Your reproductive forces are increased. Every person fears you because you are terrible and powerful. The Alien is the Lady of Flame (Egyptian Book of the Dead; Budge, 1967, p. 290).

After the subjects had completed the task, they were asked to comment about the source of the "patients' " statements. Most of the students inferred the material had been taken from case histories and were actually "just weird thoughts" that could be dangerous. Only one student recognized the "patients" from the Bible and had inferred the purpose of the experiment.

In Exp. II (March 2003) the actual statements instead of paraphrases were distributed to the class. The source of each statement, instead of the labels Patient A through J, was given. The subjects were instructed to rate the dangerousness of the statement with the same scale as employed in Exp. I. All of the procedural details, including the font and the arrangement of the rating scale, were identical to the first experiment.

The scores for each passage were added to each subject's computer file containing grades and scores for a variety of psychometric measures that had been collected about five months previously as a component of the course

requirements. They were Tobacyk's religious belief subscale (1985), the Dissociative Experience Scale (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986), Rotton's Paralogic Test (obtained from the author: Dr. J. A. Rotton, Department of Psychology, Florida International University., North Miami, Florida, 33181), the total score for the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory and the Wilson-Barber Imaginings Scale (Wilson & Barber, 1984). These scales were selected to discern how much various expressions of suggestibility (or dissociation) and the capacity to solve logical statements (Persinger, 1992) might be associated with the ratings of dangerousness presented.

In addition, the scores from nine of the relevant clusters from the Personal Philosophy Inventory (Persinger & Makarec, 1993) were obtained. These clusters of items were defined as traditional religious beliefs, with items such as "I believe in the second coming of Christ," exotic beliefs, with items such as "UFOs are from other planets," the general temporal lobe scale, religious extreme beliefs, forbidden knowledge, and histories of a sensed presence, auditory-vestibular experiences, meaningfulness from reading prose/poetry and parapsychological experiences.

Religious extreme beliefs contained items such as "If God told me to kill, I would in His Name," Forbidden knowledge contained items such as "there are some things science should not investigate" while Auditory-vestibular experiences contained items such as "just before falling asleep I have heard my name called." These clusters were used because they represented the subject's reported form and intensity of beliefs as well as the incidence of subjective experiences that have been historically associated with "hearing God" and "doing his bidding," which usually involved some form of control over others by either proselytizing or prosecution. For comparisons, the percentages of students who answered "yes" to "I believe there is a God," "I attend church at least once per month most months," and "I have had a religious experience I know was real" were extracted from their responses.

The averages of the two scores for each of the five sources were employed as the scores for the statements from the sources. Repeated-measure multivariate analysis of variance, correlational analyses, and other appropriate statistics were completed by SPSS software on a Vax 4000 computer.

Results

The means and standard deviations for ratings of dangerousness for the statements from the five scriptural sources either paraphrased as statements from delusional patients (Exp. I) or presented verbatim from the text with the source identified (Exp. II) are shown in Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the various scales from the Personal Philosophy Inventory and the questionnaires are also shown. The ω^2 estimates, or the percentage of explained variance, when the group differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$) for each measure are also shown.

TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR RANKS OF DANGEROUSNESS GIVEN STATEMENTS FROM RELIGIOUS BOOKS MASKED AS COMMENTS FROM DELUSIONAL PATIENTS (EXP. I) OR STATED VERBATIM WITH SOURCES IDENTIFIED (EXP. II) AND MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR VARIOUS QUESTIONNAIRE DATA AND PERCENTAGES FOR INFORMATION ITEMS

Variable	Exp. I ($n=40$) Masked Paraphrase		Exp. II ($n=39$) Actual Quote		ω^2_{est}, %
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Dangerousness Ratings					
New Testament (Bible)	4.0	1.3	2.6	1.5	20
Koran	5.4	1.1	4.5	1.9	8
Book of Mormon	4.1	1.5	4.9	1.7	7
Tibetan Book of the Dead	3.1	1.3	2.9	1.6	ns
Egyptian Book of the Dead	4.3	1.1	3.4	2.1	ns
Questionnaire Data					
Tobacyk Religious Subscale	4.2	1.8	4.0	1.6	ns
Dissociative Experiences	16.2	10.7	17.7	10.9	ns
Rotton's Paralogic	8.1	2.1	7.8	2.0	ns
Coopersmith Self-esteem	67.7	14.9	63.5	15.2	ns
Wilson-Barber Imaginings	22.9	8.7	22.0	7.0	ns
Personal Philosophy Inventory					
Religious Beliefs	32	30	30	18	ns
Exotic Beliefs	54	26	51	25	ns
Temporal Lobe Scale	42	18	40	17	ns
Religious Extreme Beliefs	15	19	14	23	ns
Forbidden Knowledge	47	27	48	25	ns
History of Sensed Presence	20	26	33	31	10
Prose/Poetry Meaningfulness	39	31	41	31	ns
Vestibular Effects	43	34	38	27	ns
Parapsychological Experiment	37	25	29	25	ns
Single Item Responses (%)					
Believe in God	73		68		
Attend Church Once/Month	20		13		
Had a religious experience	29		19		

Experiment I ("Delusional Statements")

Three-way analysis of variance as a function of the five sources (scriptures) for the paraphrases and the rater's endorsement of religious beliefs (lower third, middle third, upper third of the scores for Tobacyk's scale) and sex demonstrated no statistically significant differences in the overall ranking of perceived dangerousness of the "patients" as a function of the intensity of endorsement of religious beliefs ($F_{2,31}=2.14$, ns) or sex ($F_{1,31}=2.62$, ns). The interaction between sex and religious beliefs was not significant ($F_{2,31}=.18$, ns).

However there was a significant difference ($F_{4,124}=17.62$, $p<.001$; $\eta^2=.33$) between the ranks of dangerousness for the "patients" representing the five scriptures. *Post hoc* analysis (correlated *t* tests) indicated that the pa-

tients whose paraphrases were derived from the Koran were ranked as significantly ($p < .01$) more dangerous to society than patients whose paraphrases were from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Book of Mormon, or the New Testament. The scores for the Egyptian Book of the Dead occupied intermediate positions.

To accommodate individual differences the z scores for the person's ranks for each of the five sources were calculated by subtracting the raw score for each source from the mean for all five sources and then dividing by the standard deviation of the scores for all five sources. The differences among the five sources of paraphrases were statistically significant ($F_{4,124} = 16.89$, $p < .001$; variance explained = 32%).

The only statistically significant correlations (all *rhos*) between the scores for each of the five sources and the five different questionnaires and the nine different clusters from the Personal Philosophy Inventory given 5 mo. earlier were between a History of a sensed presence, Extreme religious beliefs, Parapsychological experiences, and Forbidden knowledge, and scores on the items derived from the Koran. The ranking of dangerousness for Patients C (*rho* = –.30) and F (*rho* = –.33) whose statements were paraphrases from the Koran were significantly ($p < .05$) correlated with the students' scores for extreme religious beliefs. Their scores for forbidden knowledge (*rho* = –.33) were associated with ranking for Patient C while a history of sensed presence was associated (*rho* = –.35) with the ranking for Patient F.

Exp. II: Direct Sources Identified

Three-way analysis of variance with one within-subject level (sources) and two between-subject levels (trichotomy of subject's scores for Tobacyk's scale and sex) indicated a statistically significant difference between the overall ratings of dangerousness ($F_{1,33} = 5.09$, $p < .05$). *Post hoc* analysis indicated that the individuals with the highest scores (above 4.8) for religious belief rated all statements as more dangerous ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.2$) than those with the intermediate scores (2.8 through 4.7; dangerousness $M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.0$). There were no statistically significant sex differences or interaction between sex and religious belief.

The differences in ratings of dangerousness between sources was statistically significant ($F_{4,160} = 11.32$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 29\%$). This effect size did not change appreciably when the z scores, standardized for within-subject variance, were analyzed separately. The two two-way interactions and the three-way interaction were not statistically significant. *Post hoc t* tests for the original scores indicated that statements from the Koran, Book of Mormon, and Egyptian Book of the Dead were ranked as more dangerous than the statements from the New Testament and the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Correlations (Spearman *rhos*) between the scores for dangerousness and

those on each of the 14 scales were statistically significant between the ratings of dangerousness for the quotes from the New Testament and the religious belief cluster from the Personal Philosophy Inventory (.36), the religious belief scale from Tobacyk (.50), and the experience of meaningfulness while reading prose and poetry (–.40). The only other source that was significantly ($p < .05$) correlated with the psychometric variables was the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Ratings of dangerous were negatively correlated with complex partial signs (–.46), and histories of sensed presences (–.40), vestibular-auditory experiences (–.45), and parapsychological experiences (–.30).

To investigate the potential source for the positive correlation ($r = .44$, $p < .01$) between the ratings of dangerousness for the scriptures from the New Testament and the magnitude of religious belief, partial correlations with each of the 14 scales were completed (all dfs = 38). Removal of the shared variance with these variables did not appreciably alter the strength of the correlation between dangerousness and the intensity of religious belief that remained between .40 and .44.

Both Groups Compared

According to a two-way analysis of variance with one between- and one within-subject level (source: Bible, Koran, Mormon, Egyptian, and Tibetan) the students who knew the actual sources of the statements rated them as significantly less dangerous ($F_{1,77} = 4.71$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = 6\%$) than those who did not. However, there was a significant interaction between the specific source and the two groups ($F_{4,308} = 26.62$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 25\%$).

Post hoc analysis with one-way analysis of variance (all dfs = 1,77) indicated that the group who were given the exact quote and their sources rated the statements from the New Testament as significantly less dangerous ($F = 19.40$, $p < .001$) than those who read the paraphrases as originating from delusional patients. Statements from the Koran were judged as less dangerous by the group who knew the original source ($F = 6.71$, $p < .01$) while the statements from the Book of Mormon were rated as more dangerous ($F = 5.97$, $p < .01$). There were no statistically significant differences between the groups for their ratings of the statements from the Tibetan and Egyptian books of the dead. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups on any of the 14 scales indicated in Table 1.

Discussion

The major themes of religious texts are: (1) there is an implicit organizing force in the universe (the largest conceptual set for space), (2) there is meaning to existence and (3) a component of the self is eternal or infinite (the largest conceptual set for time). Religious texts refer frequently to death and its most common precipitant: killing. Considering the role of religious beliefs as possible neurocognitive processes that reduce death anxiety by

principles of operant conditioning (Persinger, 1985), these themes would be expected.

However, many of these texts, such as the Bible and the Koran, contain many references to death by killing. Often the killing of other groups of people (even in their own habitat) is considered justified because members of the reference group assumed they were "the chosen people" by the "only" God. Frequently there are statements, attributed to God, that condone the execution of nonbelievers because they are "less than human," dangerous or even the defined manifestation of the cultural symbol for the most intense aversive stimuli ("evil").

The results of the first study indicated that the statements referring to death or killing from the Koran (even though the subject did not know this was the source) were ranked as more dangerous than statements from other religious texts. The primary source of this dangerousness was the theme that to access the maximum benefits of eternal life (the maximum reduction of death anxiety) the believer must kill nonbelievers. Even when these statements were disguised as comments from delusional patients, the comments were ranked as more dangerous to society by these first-year university students. The mean of the ranks for the paraphrases from the Koran was the only value within the range of "dangerous to society" along the Likert-type scale.

Students who ranked the statements from the Koran as less dangerous scored higher on clusters of items that reflect that some knowledge is forbidden and extreme religious beliefs (such as "if God told me to kill, I would in His Name"). Those who ranked the statements from the Koran as less dangerous were also more likely to have reported the experience of a sensed presence. Clearly, the variables that encourage an experience of a sensed presence to be associated with the perceived permission to kill others in the presence's name must be discerned.

An association between the beliefs that killing is endorsed by the believer's deity and that access to specific areas of knowledge by scientific inquiry should be restricted has serious cultural implications. Scientific examination of *all* knowledge, including the genetic definition of human life, might enhance anxiety because the results could repudiate the validity of the belief and hence the person's immortality. Such avoidance might be a normal cognitive process which prevents a conclusion whose consequences could be devastating to the person's sense of self.

The results of Exp. II, completed 1 yr. later, also showed significant differences between the rankings of dangerousness of statements from the five sources even when they were clearly identified for the subjects. The statements from the Koran and the Book of Mormon were ranked as significantly

more dangerous than those from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, or the New Testament.

When data of both studies were compared, rankings of dangerousness were significantly less when the group was told the sources of the statements. Even the dangerousness of the statements from the Koran was ranked lower when the source was identified at the time of the ranking. However, the most powerful result was the marked reduction, by a standard deviation, in the judged dangerousness of statements from the New Testament when the subjects knew the source. This predominately Christian sample rated the statements as effectively not dangerous.

A significant positive correlation ($rho = .50$) was noted between the rating of dangerousness for the statements from the New Testament and the magnitude of the endorsement of religious beliefs for the subjects who knew the sources. Partial correlation analyses with scores for dissociation, temporal lobe signs, imaginings, self-esteem, logical solutions, and other measures did not significantly alter the strength of this association. Unless this correlation is an artifact of the restricted range of the score, this relationship suggests that respondents who are more religious within the Christian tradition actively rank the statements as more dangerous. Whether they are unaware of this implication or their belief increases their sensitivity to dangerousness, even when derived from the New Testament, remains to be tested.

The differences in ratings between the two groups might be an artifact of two different classes tested in two different years. However if these striking differences are not spurious, then the role of attribution and source in the rankings of dangerousness of verbal sequences could be more important than previously assumed. It is possible that the emphasis in Canada upon "multiculturalism," "coerced political correctness," and the "concern about hurting people's feelings" may have contributed to the lower scores for the dangerousness of statements from the Koran when the subjects knew it was the source. The role of duplicity or learned avoidance of decisions which could be judged as confrontational rather than cooperative must still be evaluated.

The limitation of this study is clearly related to the phrases that were selected from the various religious scriptures and to testing by questionnaires. The results do not necessarily suggest that Islamic believers who endorse the Koran are any more or less extreme than the primarily Roman Catholic students who were subjects in this study. Islamic believers were not tested. However, if the denotative and connotative properties of the semantic and syntactic organizations of a person's language affect personal behavior, then the numbers of repetitions of phrases referring to killing others might become associated with the probability of these responses. This argument has been invoked, although without empirical causal evidence to "pro-

tect the public," to restrict or deny access to television programs, movies, Web sites, and even printed material.

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